

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: ECON, ELAB, UK, PINT

SUBJECT: A GLIMMER OF HOPE IN COAL DISPUTE

REF: LONDON 13361

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: A GLIMMER OF HOPE - ALTHOUGH ONLY A GLIMMER - EXISTS THAT BRITAIN'S COAL DISPUTE MAY BE RESOLVED. COAL BOARD AND UNION NEGOTIATORS ARE CONTINUING TO MEET TO DISCUSS ELEMENTS OF A PAY-FRinge BENEFIT PACKAGE WHICH WILL BE DISCUSSED BY THE NATIONAL UNION OF MINeworkERS (NUM) EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE NEXT WEDNESDAY, AND PRIME MINISTER HEATH MADE A RENEWED APPEAL TO THE MINERS TO SETTLE THEIR PAY CLAIM WITHIN THE LIMITS OF STAGE THREE. COAL PRODUCTION, IN THE
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MEANWHILE, IS BEING AFFECTED BY THE OVERTIME BAN.

2. THE NATIONAL COAL BOARD (NCB) AND NUM REPRESENTATIVES MET YESTERDAY (NOVEMBER 15) TO DISCUSS PAY AND WORKING CONDITIONS BUT ADJOURNED UNTIL NEXT MONDAY WITHOUT PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE MEETING. A COAL BOARD SPOKESMAN, HOWEVER, WAS "CAUTIOUSLY HOPEFUL" THAT AN AGREEMENT MIGHT YET BE REACHED BETWEEN THE NCB AND THE NUM TO END THE OVERTIME BAN. HE SAID THE TWO SIDES HAD DISCUSSED SICKNESS, RETIREMENT, PRODUCTIVITY, AND OTHER FRINGE BENEFITS WHICH COULD RESULT, ULTIMATELY IN A 16 L/2 PERCENT PAY-FRINGE BENEFIT WAGE PACKAGE. THE NCB SPOKESMAN STRESSED THAT THIS WAS A "VERY REASONABLE OFFER" AND THAT THE MINERS "OUGHT TO PLACE THE WHOLE PACKAGE BEFORE THE NUM MEMBERSHIP FOR A VOTE." THE STICKING POINT, HE NOTED, IS STILL THE 7 PERCENT WAGE RATE INCREASE, WHICH THE MINERS WANT INCREASED.

3. TREVOR BELL, THE NUM NEGOTIATOR, WAS ALSO HOPEFUL THAT THE DISPUTE WOULD BE RESOLVED. HE EMPHASIZED THAT "THE BASIC SEVEN PERCENT WAGE INCREASE OFFERED IS STILL TOO SMALL" TO SATISFY THE UNION, BUT HE AGREED THAT THE OTHER BENEFITS BEING DISCUSSED WITH THE COAL BOARD WOULD CLEARLY IMPROVE THE PACKAGE. AFTER FURTHER DISCUSSIONS WITH THE BOARD ON MONDAY, THERE WILL BE A MEETING, HE SAID, OF THE NUM'S NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, TO DISCUSS THE NCB'S OFFER. HE SAID: "NEXT WEEK WILL BE MAKE OR BREAK WEEK." HE IS HOPEFUL THAT THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WILL AGREE TO PLACE THE ENTIRE PACKAGE TO A BALLOT VOTE.

4. IN A TELEVISED INTERVIEW ON NOVEMBER 15, THE PRIME MINISTER URGED THE MINERS TO SETTLE WITH THE COAL BOARD WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF PHASE THREE AND TO END THEIR OVERTIME BAN SO THAT THE COUNTRY'S OVERALL ENERGY POSITION CAN BE STRENGTHENED. IN THE MEANWHILE ROBERT CARR, THE HOME SECRETARY, TOLD THE COMMONS ON NOVEMBER 15 THAT THE MINERS' OVERTIME BAN WAS ALREADY RESULTING IN A REDUCTION OF FROM 20-25 PERCENT IN COAL PRODUCTION.

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